

## Strivers v Skivers:

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DOI:

[10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.02.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.02.007)

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Valentine, G & Harris, C 2014, 'Strivers v Skivers: Class Prejudice and the Demonisation of Dependency in Everyday Life', *Geoforum*, vol. 53, pp. 84-92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.02.007>

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# Strivers vs skivers: Class prejudice and the demonisation of dependency in everyday life



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 27 May 2013

Received in revised form 7 February 2014

Available online 13 March 2014

### Keywords:

Prejudice

Class

Disability

Social difference

Moral geographies

Dependency

## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the moral dimension of everyday lives, using original empirical material about the judgments we make about others to explore and understand the contemporary nature of class prejudice. In doing so, we pay attention to the relationship between class prejudice and other forms of stigma and discrimination by exploring the complex (re)alignment of associations between different social groups (including working class people, disabled people, asylum seekers) in processes of 'othering' and exclusion. The research highlights the potential shared interest of groups who are demonised for being 'in need' to challenge the contemporary hegemony of the individualised ethic of self-interest which is producing a process of de-socialisation in which the importance of values such as care, compassion and social responsibility risk becoming casualties with inevitable consequences for social cohesion. Rather, the paper concludes by arguing for a re-socialisation of politics that recognises the structural causes of inequalities and which values and promotes understandings across, instead of moral judgements of, difference and our social obligations towards each other.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last two decades there has been a focus within the social sciences on 'difference' – in which experiences of prejudice and discrimination have been explored through the lens of gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, age, and religion/belief, including a concern with the institutional nature of discrimination (Valentine, 2010). The attention paid to these axes of difference/inequality and debates about intersectionality have led to suggestions that the significance of class has become obscured (Lawler, 2005). Indeed, some commentators in both academic and political arenas have gone so far as to claim that class is dead (e.g. Pakulski and Waters, 1996; Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2002). This perceived demise of class as a useful category of analysis (notwithstanding notable attempts to defend it e.g. Wright, 1985; N. Smith, 2000; McDowell, 2008) is understood to be a product of the twin forces of individualisation and de-traditionalisation (e.g. changes in property ownership, industrial, political and social organisation) which have emphasised the plasticity of individuals' identities and life chances and portrayed traditional social ties/relations as increasingly redundant (Beck, 1992). Yet, paradoxically this rejection of class has come at a time when there has been a rapid growth in

inequality (Lawler, 2005) and an increased readiness to demonise the poor in political and media discourses (Haylett, 2003; Jones, 2012).

In response a new body of literature is emerging which instead of foregrounding the primacy of employment and economic relations of work, is focusing on the lived experience of class to reassert the contemporary relevance of systems of classification (e.g. Skeggs, 2004; Sayer, 2005; McDowell, 2008). Here, often drawing on Bourdieu (1984), such research has shown how value distinctions (not just economic but also ethical) are used to categorise and define the relative worth of individuals, demonstrating the dynamic, relational and culturally produced nature of social class. Indeed, Fraser (1997) has argued that discourses of class have changed from a focus on redistribution to a politics of representation.

Influenced by this work, but in particular by Sayer (2005), who in turn took his inspiration from Adam Smith's (1759/1984) thesis on moral sentiments, we focus in this paper on the moral dimension of everyday lives, using the judgments we make about others (how we should live, what type of behaviours are good or bad) and the practices to which these judgments give rise to explore and understand the contemporary nature of class based prejudice. In doing so, we follow McDowell (2008) in recognising the importance of not merely focusing on the working-class per se, but rather recognising intersections between class positions and other

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social relations through our attention to the relationship between class prejudice and other forms of stigma and discrimination.

Whereas Haylett (2003) and Jones (2012) have provided important accounts of the stigmatisation of working-class culture they have both done so by analysing dominant discourses within British political debate, government policy and the media; neither investigated the extent to which such representations are present, mobilised or contested in everyday life. Here, we draw on original empirical research conducted as part of an ERC funded study about lived processes of social differentiation to examine how people define certain groups as less worthy of moral consideration than their own. In doing so, the paper contributes to the field of social geographies by exploring the complex (re)alignment of associations between different social groups (including working-class people, disabled people, asylum seekers etc.) in processes of 'othering' and exclusion. The study of how and why moral judgments become mapped onto particular social groups in everyday life matters because historical research shows that simplistic divisions – such as good and bad – translate into real power differences which can result in the regulation of particular social groups, producing wider social and geographical consequences (e.g. D.M. Smith, 2000; Lee and Smith, 2004).

The research upon which this paper is based involved 30 individual case studies ( $n = 90$  interviews) and associated pilot-work with research participants recruited from Leeds, a northern city in the UK. Here, each case comprised (1) a time-line, (2) a life-story interview, (3) an audio-diary of everyday encounters (4), a semi-structured interview about attitudes towards difference, and (5) an interview reflecting on the emerging finding (the origin of quotes used in the paper is identified by this number system). The research participants included those from a range of social backgrounds (in terms of socio-economic status, occupation, gender, ethnicity, religious/belief, sexual orientation and (dis)ability), whose personal circumstances and lifestyles afford them a range of opportunities for/experiences of encountering 'difference'. The participants were recruited from a survey on attitudes towards difference which was conducted as a Computer Assisted Person Interview (CAPI) with 1522 people in their homes. Through the deployment of cluster analysis, the survey respondents were selected from 8 types of communities (all with varying degrees of social and ethnic diversity) (see Piekut et al., 2012).

In this paper we employ the UK Office of National Statistics five class system – National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) – to describe the participants' social class. NS-SEC 1 = Managerial and professional occupations; 2 = Intermediate occupations; 3. Small employers and own account workers; 4. Lower supervisory and technical occupations; 5. Semi-routine and routine occupations. In addition, there are two separate categories NWL-TU = Never worked and long-term unemployed; and NC = not classified which includes full-time students, retired, home-makers, job inadequately described, and non classifiable for other reasons (see ONS 2005 for further detail). Of the 30 case-study interviewees who took part in this research half can be defined as 'middle-class' by occupation ( $n = 10$  NS-SEC 1, 2 and 3), or were not classified in the survey because they are retired/homemakers or students ( $n = 5$ ) but can be categorised as 'middle-class' on the basis of other data (e.g. previous occupation/education). Just under half can be defined as 'working-class' by occupation ( $n = 8$  NS-SEC 4 and 5) or were not classified in the survey but can be categorised in this way on the basis of other data ( $n = 5$ ). Two interviewees had never worked or were long term unemployed.<sup>1</sup> Details of where the interviewees

live have been withheld to protect their anonymity but the neighbourhoods have been loosely characterised by 'class' on the basis of tenure.

All the quotations included in this paper are verbatim. Ellipsis dots are used to indicate minor edits have been made to clarify the readability of quotations. The phrase [edit] is used to signify a section of text has been removed.

## 2. 'Chavs': Class prejudice and the moral judgement of social and cultural worth

In the 1990s several characters emerged in UK popular culture that typified the prejudices commonly expressed against working-class people. These included the television comedian Harry Enfield's characterisation of Wayne and Waynetta Slob, and *Shameless* a television comedy-drama series set on a fictional social housing estate which centred on Frank Gallagher, an alcoholic and his dysfunctional family. The stereotypical representations of heavy drinking, tracksuit wearing, fecklessness, foul-mouthed behaviour, and benefit dependency portrayed in these programmes was subsequently captured by the nomenclature – 'Chav'. Jones (2012) argues that Chav is a classist insult whose precise meaning changes according to the context in which it is used – but that it is almost always used to demean an individual or a group (albeit Chavs are a group normally assumed to be the 'doers', rather than the recipients of, prejudice). It is a prejudice that was openly expressed – in highly emotive terms ('scum', 'can't tolerate them', 'despise them') – by participants in our study who themselves came from a range of class positions, including 'working-class' interviewees critical of others in their own communities.

You see them wearing tracksuits and prejudice does creep in. Automatically, they're labelled as being a Chav - Stella-drinking *scum* [emphasis added]. To look at my little lad, the way he dresses - I look at him sometimes and say to him, you look like a Chav. When we go out anywhere, I make him get changed because I don't want people ...seeing him like that. I want to protect him from other people's views (Source 4, Male, 30–34, white British, educated to GCSE level, NS-SEC 4, 'working-class' neighbourhood).

I think really the main group of people that *I can't tolerate* [emphasis added], I don't want to accept is the people...that don't do anything, that don't think they have to work, that come from that Chav society (Source 5, Female, 35–40, white British, educated to 'A' level, NS-SEC 5, mixed class neighbourhood).

...young Chavy looking men are always more threatening...

Interviewer: What do you mean by Chavy?

...sallow skin, I don't know, wearing sort of like tracksuits, that kind of thing...like they come into [name of shop removed] quite often, in fact I served one this morning. They look tough, they look mean (Source 4, Male, 20–24, white British, NS-SEC not classified: student, 'middle-class' neighbourhood).

Although the pejorative use of Chavs is sometimes claimed to be nothing about class such depictions nonetheless constantly invoke class signs and make class distinctions (Jones, 2012). In this sense Lawler (2005) argues that taste has become a displacement of class – simultaneously marking but also occluding it. As the quotations (above and below) demonstrate the participants used a mix of aesthetic, performative and moral criteria to make such distinctions, judging others' ways of looking, being and living negatively by evoking notions of distaste, and disgust (c.f. Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2005). In particular, these accounts commonly mobilised descriptions of *embodied deficiencies* (in terms of dress, weight, skin tone). These in turn were predicated on implied *behavioural faults* – the result of a perceived inferior culture and lifestyle (e.g.

<sup>1</sup> None of the interviewees self identified as a 'Chav' although several expressed anxiety that they may be defined in this way by others.

they drink too much, eat too much). These judgements also exhibited gendered discourses about women's fecklessness, reflecting what Skeggs (2005: 967) has described as the 'historical-representational moralizing pathologizing, disgust-producing register attached to working-class women' which means that they are judged more harshly than middle-class counterparts (see also Reay, 1998, Reay and Lucey, 2000, Walkerdine et al., 2001). In contrast, men in working-class communities were commonly characterised as redundant, aggressive, heavy-drinking, and criminal (Campbell, 1993).

...this street has 40 houses. There's only six houses where there's anybody in full employment. How can the State go on supporting these people? Just as this woman [referring to a neighbour visible through a window], *I despise them* [emphasis added]... She can't go out to work. She's diabetic, overweight and a host of other problems. She's got a daughter who's just got herself pregnant, who's never worked. She'll be on benefits for the next seven or so years. She'll get pregnant again I suppose... she's got another daughter. She's too ugly to get a boyfriend (Source 4, Male, 75–79, British Asian, educated to degree level, NS-SEC not classified: retired, 'working-class' neighbourhood).

For middle-class respondents these prejudicial judgements assumed their own middle-class lifestyle as normative; whereas for working-class respondents such judgments enabled them to distance themselves from the stigmatised identity of 'Chav'. In this sense, Chavs were defined by the participants as the product of their own poor choices and lack of self management in ways which resonate with individualised notions of citizenship, rather than through the lens of structural disadvantage (e.g. in terms of wealth or educational inequalities).

The participants' class prejudices were also spatialised as place-related phobias. Since 1979 when the right to buy council houses was introduced in the UK over a million such homes have passed into private ownership. As a result there has been a spatial concentration of the poorest into the remaining social housing such that 'over two-thirds of those living in social housing belong to the poorest two-fifths of the population' (Daily Telegraph 21 February, 2007, cited in Jones, 2012). The outcome of this emplacement of economic and social disadvantage – and all the pressures associated with it – is that council estates have become characterised as sites of anti-social behaviour including alcoholism, drug addiction, petty crime, vandalism, and what Hanley (2007: 7) describes as a 'kind of stir-craziness induced by chronic poverty' in contrast to the perceived moral order of middle-class suburbs. This represents the continuation of a spatial separation of the middle-class from the 'dirt' and 'deviance' of working-class slums which dates back to the 19th century (Sibley, 1995). As such, class relations have become physically embedded into urban landscapes such that they appear 'natural' (Hanley, 2007; Rogaly and Taylor, 2011). Below an interviewee describes the stigma of coming from a council estate and the inherent sense of inferiority it engenders for her given the classist insult Chav has been associated with such estates.

...because I don't on the surface come across as the sort of standard typical single white mum living on a council estate, especially at work or when I'm out I hear people talking about it. There is a huge stigma attached to you if you live on a council estate. The rest of society, I think they don't understand us. I don't think they understand that there's a lot of people that can't afford regular housing...I was possibly a bit paranoid. But when my daughter was going to toddler groups and I was mixing with the Mums in the wider area...we'd arranged to go round to each others' houses. I would never invite them here because I was embarrassed. I think I'd heard comments. They'd

been talking about Chavs and being quite negative (Source 2, Female 25–29, white British, educated to degree level, NS-SEC 5, 'working-class' neighbourhood).

At the same time, some of the middle-class participants also expressed concerns about the potential encroachment of uncivilised or unruly 'Chavs' into everyday public places. In this sense, their distaste for proximity to different (i.e. loud, vulgar, chaotic) ways of living and relating represents a desire for order and control, socio-spatial practices which Sibley (1995) has argued form the basis of most exclusionary processes.

...there are different routes – the buses which go to a nice area, the people who used to commute on those bus, they are nicer than the people who live in the underprivileged area, so I have also noticed that difference. I have seen different attitude within different groups of people...I have seen people from underprivileged background, they are less likely to respect all kinds of people, not only elderly people, but everybody, they are disrespectful (Source 4, Female, 30–34, British Asian, education to postgraduate level, NS-SEC 1, 'working-class' neighbourhood).

I never thought I would think like this.. I don't want to think like this. The house over the road with the red door is a rented house. I didn't think I had a problem living in an area where there are rented houses...I realised that I do...those neighbours every time I encounter them and their friends, they really annoy me. They do different things like park in front of the drive so I can't get the car out or just generally being completely obnoxious...I go out and ask them to move so I can get my car out, and they have a go at me for asking them to move the car, and telling me that I'm being unreasonable. In terms of difference, when it happens, I get completely wound up by the fact that we own our house and they don't own their house, and yet they're treating me like I'm not entitled to certain things when I own the property. I'm really surprised that I feel like that about them. [Edit] Whenever I go to Morrisons [a budget supermarket chain]...I always think something awful about the people in there...people who I see as being quite poor and I'll think something horrible (Source 2, Female, 30–34, white British, educated to postgraduate level, NS-SEC 1, 'middle-class' neighbourhood).

In sum, in this section we have used original empirical material to explore the contemporary nature of class prejudice. The findings demonstrate the extent to which dominant discourses about 'Chavs', which stigmatise working-class culture within British political and media discourse (Haylett, 2003; Jones, 2012), are being actively reproduced in everyday life. Notably, the research participants' accounts evidence the theorisation of class as a process of evaluation (Sayer, 2005) by identifying how value distinctions about embodiment, and ways of living and relating are used in emotive ways to categorise and define the relative *social and cultural worth* of groups of people encountered. Middle-class respondents have a vested interest in these judgements because they reproduce and enforce the 'normativity' (and implicit superiority) of a middle-class lifestyle. For the working-class participants holding these views enables them to distance themselves from the classist insult 'Chav' and so reinforce their own sense of self-worth and identity. In this sense, for both groups their prejudicial evaluations preclude any need to feel compassion or to take any responsibility for those less successful than themselves.

Such moral judgments matter because, as the data has shown, they are used to justify socio-spatial processes of exclusion (e.g. spatial marginalisation or control of poor people) which have powerful resonance with the way other groups, such as minority ethnic communities and lesbians and gay men have been demonised and



regulated (c.f. Sibley, 1995; Valentine and Sadgrove, 2013). Moreover, the expression of class prejudice by some of the working-class participants about others within their own communities demonstrates the extent to which poverty and disadvantage have come to be seen through the lens of individualisation rather than in terms of structural disadvantage and the workings of capitalism. This matters because focusing on the moral failings or cultural worthlessness of individuals obscures the causes of inequality, divides communities with shared political interests, corrodes compassion for the poorest in society, and obviates any recognition of the need to challenge disadvantage. In the following sections we unpack explanations for class prejudice further, and its relationship to other forms of prejudice, by exploring how and why moral judgements are made about others' *economic worth*.

### 3. Strivers and skivers: economic worth and the morality of work

'Every middle-class person has a dormant class prejudice which needs only a small thing to arouse it...The notion that the working-class have been absurdly pampered, hopelessly demoralised by dole, old-age pensions, free education etc.' (George Orwell, *Road to Wigan Pier*, cited in Jones, 2012: 13). This prejudice was evident amongst the participants for whom moral worth was frequently predicated on a willingness, and capacity, to undertake paid work – in other words on economic value – which in turn was constructed as an outcome of the 'work' put into achieving an education or training. Such is the power of this discourse that it was even repeated by one interview who has been unemployed for a long time, and whose identity might be read by others as a skiver.

I think work is what you make it, if you stick your nose to the grindstone...you've every chance of getting promotion and getting up the ladder and earning more money. I'm afraid a lot of these whingers they've not put their nose down to the grindstone at school and got qualifications. So when they don't get promotion and don't get bigger wage rises they start howling about it (Source 5, Male, 55–59, white, British, vocational qualifications, NWL-TU: long term unemployed, 'working-class' neighbourhood).

I mean if someone legitimately has got a bad back then – if someone can't read or write there are adult education classes and all the rest of it. Go –there's no excuse, just go and learn to read. Or do a job where you don't need to do that...I think [I have] quite a big responsibility switch in my head as well...I think people should take responsibility for what they're doing and shouldn't expect the rest of us to look after them (Source 4, Male, 30–34, white British, educated to degree level, NS-SEC 1, 'middle-class' neighbourhood).

As these quotations illustrate the interviews were laced with individualised discourses (Giddens, 1998) about the importance of agency, self-management and personal responsibility in a meritocratic society in which poverty and disadvantage were implicitly regarded as individual failings – the result of poor investments in terms of effort and in choice-making or risk-taking. The corollary of this is that people receiving welfare benefits were blamed for their own social position. This was configured as a consequence of their personal characteristics rather than an outcome of structural inequalities and uneven wealth distribution, in which a clear distinction was drawn between those who are morally worthy of support and the those who are dismissed as failures of self-governance, or as having chosen worklessness and having a false sense of entitlement to social support. The emotional sub-text of these interviews was a lack of sympathy for those who are unemployed (c.f. Rowlingson et al., 2010). By investing in this

prejudice research participants from across the class spectrum both gain a sense of security: that the same fate will not befall them; and are relieved of any sense of social responsibility for those in poverty.

...we have both just worked really hard...everything that we have is because we earned it. We've worked for it and we're not taking hand outs... I think where I lose respect is when they [unemployed people] start complaining about how I can't do this, I don't have – when I've got a little 25 year old from the Czech Republic has come here and managed to get four jobs. There are jobs out there...if you just knuckle down...But people don't want to pick strawberries and clean the toilet...sometimes there comes across this feeling of entitlement, that this is what they deserve and that they've earned their right to be on the dole. 'Why should I work at McDonald's for £5.50 an hour?' (Source 4, Female, 45–49, white, other background, educated to degree level, NS-SEC 2, 'middle-class' neighbourhood).

Stealing. Getting money that you don't deserve like they do on the dole...I mean especially when they're young enough and fit enough to work. I've worked all my life... There's some people do not like work. I can't understand that for the life in me. What do they do all day? (Source 5, Female, 70–74, white British, no formal qualifications, NS-SEC unclassified: retired, 'middle-class' neighbourhood).

I do think there are jobs there. You can walk into any job centre or any website and there are jobs there it's just that these people choose not to take the job...I don't think anybody can sit there and say I can't get work. It might not be a well-paid job, it might not be the job that you want but there is a job and if you want it you can get it... (Source 4, Female, 35–40, white British, educated to A level, NS-SEC 5, mixed class neighbourhood).

The arguments, made by both middle-class and working-class research participants, echo a long history – dating back to the mid 19th century – in which distinctions have been drawn between the deserving (industrious, disciplined) and undeserving poor (lazy, undisciplined, criminal). Sennett (1998) argues that it was in this period that the moral value of work and of being self-sufficient, and the consequent fear of being unproductive and dependent, became ingrained in society. Subsequently the characterisation of those who do not, or who are unable to work in paid employment, as socially and morally separate from, and a drag upon, the hard-working majority population, has become a recurrent powerful public discourse in the UK.

In Britain of the 1980s Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government was influenced by the contentious work of American Charles Murray (1984) who argued that an underclass (comprising a heterogeneous group of the long-term unemployed, lone-parent families, petty criminals, council estate residents etc.) was being created by liberal social policies that were encouraging welfare dependency. It was mobilised by her government (as well as right-wing governments in North America, Western Europe and the Antipodes) to justify the retrenchment of the welfare state (Haylett, 2003). A philosophy also evident in subsequent Labour governments' strategies of dividing the poor into different groups who are more or less justifiably poor (Haylett, 2001), organising immigration policies around a principle of deterrence (Fekete, 2001), and in contemporary representations of welfare claimants by coalition government ministers, right-wing social commentators and the tabloid media which are laced with moralistic expectations about the need for the poor to change their lifestyles and behaviour. In this sense, debates about the underclass have become politically-led and sanctioned articulations of prejudice which have depicted poor communities as responsible for their own poverty.

Yet these powerful discourses about the deserving and undeserving poor were not articulated by our participants in a simplistic way according to class position. Rather, the research has identified a complex moral geography of 'communities of interest' in which the participants considered different 'other' groups as less worthy of moral consideration than their own group. While many middle-class respondents did draw on discourses about the undeserving poor (see quotes earlier in the section), others were more empathetic to this demonised group referring to their own education/workplace experiences to recognise structural causes of inequality. Notably, the political management of an increasingly globalised economy has encouraged flexible labour practices, privatised much of the public sector, and restructured the welfare state. These processes have produced a growth of increased casual or insecure forms of employment that have impacted on poor working-class communities contributing to family and community instability, anti-social behaviour and drug and alcohol dependency (Haylett, 2001; Jones, 2012). In implicitly acknowledging such processes some of our participants from across the class spectrum did recognise that poor people are a result of increased economic marginalisation, rather than its cause.

I think this last year of being at Uni I think I've become more tolerant to different families living in different ways...I suppose prior to being at Uni, I might have looked at a poor family...Say if the children weren't always dressed clean or you could see that their house wasn't the best that it could have been kind of thing. I might have dismissed that person and thought well I don't really want to associate with you. You're like that through your own fault. I suppose I quite often thought other people's situations were of their own making...You haven't worked enough to make that better. But with being at Uni for the last year it actually made me realise that sometimes people's situations aren't their own fault. It's - people can be in a situation due to obviously other circumstances out of their control (Source 2, Female, 35–40, white British, educated to A level, NC: student, mixed class neighbourhood).

I think people that have been unemployed for quite long time. I think that's because most people haven't been in that situation and don't realise the mental effect it has on people getting depressed and in a rut. People don't understand why someone can't better themselves...I get on this band-wagon about people and class and how they are so judgemental about the working-class or people that are homeless, or unemployed or struggling on benefits...I don't have much tolerance for those people that look the other way...I think well you don't understand because you don't know because you've been quite privileged (Source 2, Female 25–29, white British, educated to degree level, NS-SEC 5, middle-class neighbourhood).

Correspondingly, some of those earning low incomes and living on council estates were keen to draw moral boundaries between themselves and their unemployed neighbours. These participants strongly dis-identified with the those who do not work and were fearful of having the identity 'Chav' imposed upon them because of where they live and their proximity to those perceived to have moral and personal failings. For these working-class participants their own agency, values and way of life, predicated on self-discipline and hard-work, were constructed as a defence against the possibility they might slip into poverty and dependency. As such, their prejudices serve to distance them from demonised groups who might be a threat to their own identities and provide a sense of security that they will not end up in the same position.

...for me, I'd pretty much take whatever I can get but you've got people at 16/17 that are 'Why should I go and stack shelves?', 'Why should I go sweep up around a building yard?' If you want

money and you want to better yourself, you'll do anything. And it boils down to the welfare state...because people will just sit on hand-outs for the rest of their life if they can... they have no morals, they have no values and no get up and go. They don't want to get out there, they don't want to better themselves. And I don't know whether it's because...they've grown up within that environment where their parents haven't worked and they've just lived on State hand-outs or whether or they just genuinely can't be bothered...[Edit]... they don't want to get a job because it's too easy for them to live off hand-outs (Source 4, Male, 30–34, white British, educated to GCSE level, NS-SEC 4, 'working-class' neighbourhood).

I don't think there is poverty in Britain, really. I think a lot of it is self-made, in a way...unless you've got something radically wrong with you and you can't cope with life, some mental depression or what have you... But I think if you've got your faculties, I don't think there is such a thing as poverty, really. I think a lot of it is self-inflicted (Source 4, Male, 65+, white British, educated to degree level, NS-SEC not classified, retired, 'middle-class' neighbourhood).

As the first quotation above indicates some of the participants reproduced media and popular discourses that poverty is passed intergenerationally: a product of poor parenting and the failure of one generation to instil a work ethic and values of self-discipline and personal responsibility into the next, rather than the workings of capitalism. Indeed, it was the anthropologist Oscar Lewis who first employed notions of familial cultures of poverty as a way of explaining marginalised groups in societies outside of the West. This way of thinking was then applied to black so-called 'dysfunctional' families in the US in the 1960s, before materialising as an explanation for why poor people are poor in the UK in the 1970s (Reay, 1998, Walkerdine et al., 2001). Such views enable their holders to believe they can protect their own children from a future of poverty and therefore facilitate a sense of security in an insecure world.

it's down to the parenting and you can see what their parents do and they're just going to mimic that throughout their whole life. And that's why as I say, I've changed as much as I can...and then pass it onto my children because I don't want them standing about mugging old women and selling drugs and things like that. I don't want them anywhere near it if I can help it...I try and get out with them, just the other week when we had really nice weather...I said, 'oh we'll go round to the park for the afternoon'. They [neighbours on his council estate] don't even do that. They're at home all bleeding day and they can't - the kids finish school at three o'clock - even be arsed just to take them to the park...There is no interaction with the children whatsoever (Source 2, Male, 30–34, white British, educated to GCSE level, NS-SEC 4, 'working-class neighbourhood').

I think it's probably a generational thing to start off with...they've got it from their parents that they've been brought up that you don't have to work. They've never seen anybody - they don't see anybody in their own family going out to work... they don't have it in their mind that actually you do need to go and get a job and to better your life...They're just, what will we do now, we'll do nothing, we'll sit about and having kids...because they get given everything anyway. They can get council house or whatever and then the benefits (Source 5, Female, 35–40, white British, educated to A level, NS-SEC 5, mixed class neighbourhood).

In the context of austerity - including wage freezes, and prices rises - these research participants articulated a strong sense of frustration and injustice. In the 1990s Galbraith (1992) suggested that contemporary western societies like the UK were characterised by

a 'contented majority' who, economically successful and secure, had little in common with, or concern for, excluded minorities. In the 21st century this culture of contentment is increasingly unravelling as rapid social and economic change is making the world seem a less secure place for majority as well as minority communities (Young, 2007). The global demand for flexible labour and the impact of the contemporary financial crisis have reverberated through the employment structure producing rising levels of redundancy, an increased emphasis on short-term contracts and part-time work which in turn have created chronic job insecurity. Meanwhile those with jobs find themselves working harder and longer in what has been described as 'work intensification' (Burchell, 1999). For working-class people who bought into the discourse of the meritocracy – that poverty/inequality is a result of differential effort (e.g. in terms of work, education and so on) – and believed they could improve their social position through working hard there is a sense of bitterness that recipients of benefits – so-called 'skivers' – appear to be better off than 'the strivers' which justifies the prejudices they hold. It is a narrative which the current UK government is mobilising to justify welfare reforms including benefit cuts. These working-class participants describe the sense of injustice they feel because they consider their moral worth as hard-working citizens is not recognised and why they feel prejudice towards those who do not work.

...my job is not the greatest in the world...but that job enables me to have a car, that job enables me to go out and do stuff for my kids. These that are on benefits would rather just sit and drink bleeding Stella...You see some of the kids just roaming the [council] estate. It annoys me. They've got more disposal income than I have because they've no council tax and they've no rent to pay. They've got gas and electric and water rates and then their food. With tax credits, family allowance and their income support, I bet they've £300 a week. I haven't got that as a disposable income. This is what really gets on my nerves. It's a really sore subject with me...it's me that's helping keep this country ticking over. It's me that goes to work every day to make a living (Source 2, Male, 30–34, white British, educated to GCSE level, NS-SEC 4, 'working-class' neighbourhood). I know a lot of people and a lot of families...where nobody works and they were quite open saying why should I when I get X amount for not working. I know from my cousins that the amount they receive on benefits is more than me and my husband live on [Edit]. I mean I can only speak from what we see but I think a lot of people that are working just like us on quite low incomes but are working but the money that we get is money that we work for. We have been quite impacted by the recession. We used to have a little bit of spare money each month and now we haven't, we don't have any. We literally do have to think where is the money going to go this month and everything has to be worked out down to a T about making sure that the money lasts...So I think people that are in the same situation as us are feeling quite even more negative about people that are on benefits. Because it doesn't seem as though their financial situation has changed and then they're no worse off than they've always been and yet they're doing nothing for it. Whereas people are working and struggling so I think the gap to feeling negative against people that don't work is getting more because of the recession (Source 2, Female, 35–40, white British, educated to A level, NS-SEC 5, mixed neighbourhood).

As such, these findings contribute to an emerging evidence base (e.g. Castell and Thompson, 2007; Rowlingson et al., 2010) that is beginning to show scepticism amongst the public about the existence of poverty in Britain, a growing lack of sympathy for people who are not in work and the increased mobilisation of individualistic explanations about the moral failings of poor people

to account for economic inequalities. The evidence of this research is that people from across the class spectrum hold prejudices towards those who do not work (so-called 'skivers') because dependency on welfare is perceived to be self-inflicted: a product of personal choice (e.g. not to engage at school, not to take low-paid work) and/or a lack of self-discipline. Blaming unemployed and poor people for their own misfortune enables the holders of such views to have a false sense of security that they will not experience poverty because they have the personal characteristics (hard-working, self-governing, resourceful) to avoid dependency. It also facilitates a sense of injustice that those who do not work are rewarded for their inadequacies at the expense of hard-working tax payers who support them: and consequently to a demonisation of those in need.

The extent to which the popular and media discourse about 'strivers vs skivers' is becoming embedded in the popular consciousness – demonstrated by this research – matters because unless checked it gives political licence to the Government to cut welfare support to those most in need with the consequence that inequalities will be further exacerbated rather than addressed.

#### 4. The morality of dependency: disability, migration and the re-racialisation of the working-class

This demonisation of dependency is not limited to the stereotype of the Chav. Rather, the same rationale was mobilised by some participants to question disabled<sup>2</sup> people's entitlements to benefits and other forms of socio-economic support. Here, individualised discourses were also evident with both middle and working-class research participants emphasising the need for disabled people to make a contribution to society where possible (e.g. by undertaking paid work) rather than being dependent on welfare benefits, and stressing the importance of disabled people taking responsibility for their own lives rather than deserving 'special treatment' from the State. In making such arguments participants fail to recognise the dis-abling nature of many work environments and both social and institutional discrimination (e.g. Hall, 1999; Hall and Wilton, 2011). Rather they justify their prejudices by evoking a narrative of injustice claiming that disabled people are the recipients of special or privileged treatment which is unfair on ordinary hard-working citizens who are expected to strive to take personal responsibility for their own lives.

...if you are disabled you get special rules...The Government...want everybody back into work whether you're disabled or able-bodied which I don't have a problem with that. If you're disabled and you are able to do something then why can't you go to work? (Source 4, Female, 40–44 white British, vocational qualifications, NS-SEC unclassified: student, mixed neighbourhood) it's unfortunate, I feel sympathy or empathy but I don't think there are any issues surrounding disability. I think disabled people are just ill people – well not ill people. Do you know what I mean? They just haven't got everything working properly...I have got a bit of a prejudice when it comes to mental disability...they shouldn't be absolved from responsibility...I think it's like everything, as long as people *don't get preferential treatment* [our emphasis] because of being different (Source 4, Male, 30–34, white British, educated to degree level, NS-SEC 1, mixed neighbourhood). [her husband is a builder] because he's local authority...and they do a lot of work for disabled people [modifying home]...I think well why is it always these kind of people that are getting this?

<sup>2</sup> Disability was critiqued as a category in itself and not just in relation to groupings within the working-class



What's wrong with us? They're playing the system here (Source 5, Female, 50–54, white British, educated to GCSE equivalent, NS-SEC 4, mixed neighbourhood).

The same discourses about moral and economic worth were also mobilised to justify prejudices towards asylum seekers and refugees. Participants were supportive of those perceived to be genuinely deserving (e.g. because of war and violence) but hostile to those perceived to be 'skivers'. These were those who were represented as having come to the UK in pursuit of benefits rather than to work and who were believed to receive undeserved resources in comparison with the support available for 'deserving' citizens such as the elderly and hard-working ordinary people (Waite et al., 2014). Such views reflect the insecurity felt by many participants about austerity and public spending cuts. As such, the desire to exclude those classified as 'undeserving' is motivated, at least in part, by a misplaced sense of injustice. Namely, that new arrivals who have not yet paid tax in the UK might receive welfare support, and that these new demands on the State by those who have not yet contributed to it, may undermine its ability to meet the interviewees' own future welfare entitlements when they reach pensionable age.

There were a letter put on Facebook last week from the asylum seeker place down in Manchester and they were calling in all the gas cards and all the electric cards so they could put £120 on the electric card and £90 on the gas cards for the asylum seekers. Which...was totally wrong because they're not paying into the country. We've got our pensioners that are dying because they can't afford heating yet these come over into our country and they're getting it all for nothing...they should be giving the same to our own pensioners but they're not. Our pensioners have paid in and everything but these people have just come into the country and they getting everything and there's nowt you can do about it (Source 4, Male, 55–59, white British, no formal qualifications, NS-SEC 5, 'working-class' neighbourhood). We would be at the receiving end of this because the government won't be able to pay our pensions...These people here, like these menace next door, I mean they've not contributed anything to this society...I mean there is one black woman on the estate. She's got three children from three different men – she's just come into the country and she's on benefits...People will resent that...These people are getting all these things for free...So it's building that kind of resentment will eventually reach a crescendo and explode (Source 2, Male, 75–79, British Asian, educated to degree level, NS-SEC not classified: retired, 'working-class' neighbourhood).

Whereas research participants were hostile to asylum seekers who were perceived (wrongly) to be the recipients of generous benefits and to be dependent on the State there was not widespread hostility towards immigrants. Instead, there was recognition from some of those interviewed (from middle and working-class backgrounds) that most immigrants work hard and are prepared to do low-paid jobs that cannot otherwise be filled. In this sense they were implicitly constructed as the 'deserving poor' because of their personal characteristics (e.g. work-ethic, self-motivation) and were contrasted favourably with feckless, lazy Chavs. In such ways, the demonisation of 'dependency' is mobilised to justify class prejudice.

You see a lot of them working in garages, cleaning cars and that. They're working and they're trying to earn money, so I think you've got to respect them because they're trying not to be a drudge [drag]... (Source 4, Female, 80–84, white British, no formal qualifications, NS-SEC not classified: retired, 'middle-class' neighbourhood).

I think everybody should work. Everybody should earn their keep. I don't agree with people freeloading...It would be no different whether he was from Poland or if he was from Leeds, I'd still have the same principles in that respect...White British people can be scroungers, probably more so to be honest with you. I've been with quite a few people, different jobs and that. Eastern Europeans I've found them particularly hard workers most of them. Very committed the people I know anyway...it's hard workers against freeloaders. I've got no prejudice against these people [i.e. migrants who work]...I've also worked in lots of places around the [name of council estate] way and it's quite obvious that the people that live there, they rarely work. It's obvious they spend the day in the pub and bookies and that. I suppose you can get a bit angry...I've done a hard days work here and then you're doing nothing (Source 2, Male, 60–64, white British, professional qualification to degree equivalent NS-SEC 1, 'middle-class' neighbourhood).

Whereas white is usually considered a category of racialised privilege that predisposes people to success (Bonnett, 1999) white participants nonetheless described white culture as deficient and white unemployed people as lazy and dependent. These accounts reproduce UK Government discourses dating back to the 1990s – when in the wake of urban riots – Haylett (2001) argues there was a construction of class superiority and a marking of white working-class bodies as deficient. In this sense, contemporary processes of class prejudice are mobilising a new form of 'racialisation'. It is a process which is also evident in Rogaly and Taylor's (2011) study of three social housing estates in Norwich, UK. Here, local teenagers described experiences of being racialised by middle-class students from the nearby university as white trash and 'Chavs' in which it is the elision of race and class that is used to convey a lack of moral and economic worth and a predisposition to fail (albeit there is sometimes a confusing implicit assumption that all migrants – including Europeans such as Poles and Portuguese – are non-white).

This is the attitude that we've got...here of the white youth. It's like when they offer them...It's a job, it'll feed you, it'll keep you off the streets. But they don't see it that way...We think things should be handed to us on a plate. I think that's white economies, you don't know what you have. It's just like back in the 60s and 70s when the Indians came over to do the menial jobs that we wouldn't do... I think that's what a lot of white people are bitter towards people from, the Polish and your Africans because they'll work (Source 4, Male, 30–34, white British, educated to GCSE level, NS-SEC 2, 'working-class' neighbourhood). ...that side of me is derogatory about the white people in this country who think the taxpayers owe them a living and they think it's clever to claim. I know a few lads who used to be benefits officers and they used to love doing obbos [undercover observations] and catching people out. So that's the *Daily Mail* side of me. I just – I mean there's more issues now because the recession's on but what, five, six years ago there was no excuse for anybody really to be complaining that they couldn't get jobs...when I was paying plumbers £45 an hour and bricklayers something similar [Edit] There's Portuguese fruit pickers in Lincolnshire...What white people or English people are going to do that when they can earn as much sitting on their arse getting the dole (Source 4, Male, 30–34, white British, educated to degree level, NS-SEC 1, mixed neighbourhood).

In this sense, contemporary class prejudice is not merely about drawing simplistic distinctions in terms of moral and economic worth between the working-class and the middle-class. Rather, it suggests the emergence of a complex realignment of associations



between social groups in which hard-working middle-class and working-class people in employment (strivers) are seen to have more in common with hard-working immigrants than with their unemployed white neighbours and fellow citizens (skivers) (c.f. Reay et al. (2011)'s study of the white middle-classes in urban schooling which identified shared values between this group and BME groups). Such groupings break down racialised discourses which previously associated the category black with derogatory characteristics such as laziness (Sibley, 1995) and challenge stereotypical representations of white working-class communities which have presumed them to be backward and racist because they are threatened by competition from migrants for employment and housing. Instead, negative economic and moral worth is associated with dependency in which there is a reconfiguration of the association of idleness, fecklessness and an expectation of support with the white 'under class', disabled people and asylum seekers/refugees, and a recognition of the moral worth of economic migrants (who are implicitly racialised as non-white). Here, the internally differentiated nature of class categories is also evident, with working-class people living in close spatial proximity to so-called skivers having an investment in dis-identifying with, and distancing themselves from, their neighbours through a fear of being contaminated by having the negative identity 'Chav' imposed upon them.

This demonisation of dependency urgently needs to be challenged because it encourages a loss of compassion, care and social responsibility for the most vulnerable in society. Left unchecked a culture predicated on the promotion of choice, self-interest and the individual is producing a de-socialisation of society which justifies the (re)production of class prejudice.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has explored contemporary class prejudice in the UK. It has presented original empirical research which demonstrates that media discourses about 'Chavs' that stigmatise working-class culture (Haylett, 2003; Jones, 2012) are being mobilised in everyday life producing a consequent social acceptability of 'classism' even amongst those living in working-class communities. This class prejudice is predicated on a moral evaluation of the relative social and cultural worth (e.g. in terms of value distinctions about embodiment and ways of living and relating), and the relative economic worth, of groups of people (predicated on discourses of personal responsibility and work ethic) which is giving rise to a sense of injustice among those in low-income, working communities and growing social antagonisms about who has the right to make claims on the State. Evident in these distinctions is a new form of racialisation with white research participants describing white culture as deficient and white unemployed people as lazy and dependent. It is this elision of both class and race that is being used to articulate so-called Chavs' lack of moral and economic worth.

The reason political and media discourses of individualisation have achieved such hegemony is not just because of their cultural power, but because they resonate with the sense of socio-economic uncertainty and insecurity which is being experienced by both middle-class and working-class communities. The rapid socio-economic change which has characterised the recent past (e.g. global financial crisis and associated austerity) has created an anxiety about competition for scarce resources and the ability of those in work to maintain and protect their way of life, not just in the present but also the future (e.g. will the State be able to pay their pensions?). As such, discourses of individualisation have gained such traction because they enable the holders to believe they can protect themselves from poverty and dependency through their own efforts and therefore to have a sense of security in an insecure world.

Indeed, the vehemence of class prejudice articulated by some of the working-class research participants about others within their own communities, as well as by middle-class respondents, demonstrates the extent to which poverty is now popularly understood as a personal failing rather than a product of the workings of capitalism. This internal differentiation of class as a category (also evident among middle-class respondents with some articulating class prejudice, while others showed recognition and understanding of structural disadvantage) appears to be undermining working-class solidarity and the possibilities of effective collective political action. For example, by pitting the interests of the unemployed against those of low paid, and migrant, workers in which the latter's interests are perceived to be better served by supporting a neo-liberal political agenda, rather than one of social justice.

At the same time however, the research also shows that powerful historical discourses about dependency, which are used to draw moral distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor are also being mobilised in relation to disabled people and asylum seekers and refugees. This is producing a complex realignment of associations between social groups in which there is a reconfiguration of the association of idleness and unjustified special privilege with the white 'under-class', disabled people and asylum seekers/refugees, whereas hard working middle-class and working-class people in employment (strivers) are aligned with hard-working immigrants rather than their feckless fellow citizens (skivers).

While this focus on the perceived cultural and economic failings of those in need may fragment the shared political interests of working-class communities it does however offer new possibilities for other forms of collective politics to emerge. In particular, this research highlights the potential shared interests of a range of groups who are demonised as dependent to challenge the contemporary hegemony of the individualised ethic of self-interest which is producing a process of de-socialisation in which the importance of values such as care, compassion and social responsibility risk becoming casualties with inevitable consequences for social cohesion. Rather, we need a re-socialisation of politics that recognises the structural causes of inequalities and which values and promotes understandings across, instead of moral judgements of, difference and our social obligations towards each other.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the European Research Council which funded this research through an Advanced Investigator Award (grant agreement no. 249658) entitled *Living with Difference in Europe: making communities out of strangers in an era of supermobility and superdiversity*.

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